



Lowell, Robert (Vol. 124) - Introduction

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Robert Lowell 1917–1977

American poet, dramatist, critic, and translator.

The following entry presents an overview of Lowell's career through 1997. See also [Robert Lowell Criticism](#) (Volume 1), and Volumes [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [8](#), [9](#), [11](#).

INTRODUCTION

A foremost contributor to the development of "confessional" poetry, Robert Lowell is widely regarded as one of the most gifted and influential American poets of the postwar period. While his early verse in the Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) is distinguished for its complex formalism and technical virtuosity, during the 1960s Lowell emerged as a leading innovator of the confessional mode. This highly charged, self-revelatory style of writing, heralded by his important collection *Life Studies* (1959), featured a new emphasis on intense, uninhibited discussion of personal, family, and psychological struggles. Though much of Lowell's poetry centers upon the autobiographic details of his New England upbringing, mental illness, and personal relationships, his erudition, mastery of conventional forms, and synthesis of private and public concerns separates him from other poets working in the confessional vein. Lowell's assiduous effort to discover new poetic forms through assimilation of traditional and modernist techniques is reflected in the impressive range and diversity of his work.

Biographical Information

Born Robert Traill Spence Lowell, Jr., to parents of prominent Boston families, Lowell descended from a long line of distinguished New Englanders, including literary relatives James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell. Lowell's turbulent childhood, dominated by incessant tensions between his father, a naval officer, and mother, left deep and lasting emotional scars. He attended preparatory school at St. Mark's School in Southborough, Massachusetts, where he was a student of poet Richard Eberhart, Lowell's first literary mentor. At St. Mark's, Lowell also earned the nickname "Cal," a dual reference to Shakespeare's Caliban and the infamous Roman emperor Caligula. Lowell began studies at Harvard University in 1935, though left abruptly in 1937 to travel with English novelist Ford Madox Ford to the Tennessee home of poet Allen Tate and his wife, novelist Caroline Gordon. After spending a summer with the Tate's, Lowell followed Tate to Kenyon College in Ohio, where he enrolled and studied under John Crowe Ransom. While at Kenyon, Lowell met lifelong friends poet Randall Jarrell and short story writer



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Peter Taylor. Lowell graduated *summa cum laude* with a degree in classics in 1940 and, during the same year, converted to Roman Catholicism and married novelist Jean Stafford. The next year, Lowell attended graduate courses at Louisiana State University, where he studied under Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. After brief employment with the Catholic publishing house Sheed and Ward in New York, Lowell took up residence with the Tate's in the Tennessee mountains, where he continued to write. A conscientious objector to military service during the Second World War, Lowell was imprisoned for six months during 1943 and 1944. He then published his first collection of poetry, *The Land of Unlikeness* (1944), followed two years later by *Lord Weary's Castle*, for which he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. He also received a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award and a Guggenheim fellowship in 1947. In the period before the publication of his next volume, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), Lowell divorced Stafford, abandoned the Catholic Church, and suffered a severe bout of manic depression, a psychological disorder that afflicted him for the rest of his life. Lowell married writer Elizabeth Hardwick in 1949. During the 1950s, he taught at several universities, maintained a friendship with William Carlos Williams, and traveled to California, where he encountered Allen Ginsberg and other Beat generation writers. Lowell settled in New York in 1960 and, from 1963 to 1970, commuted to Boston to teach at Harvard. He won a National Book Award in 1960 for *Life Studies* and a Bollingen Prize for *Imitations* (1961), a collection of verse translations, in 1962. Lowell also published *Phaedra*, a verse translation of Jean Baptiste Racine's tragedy, in *Phaedra and Figaro* (1961). During the mid-1960s, Lowell produced *For the Union Dead* (1964) and *The Old Glory* (1965), a trilogy of plays including *Endecott and the Red Cross* and *My Kinsman, Major Molineux*, both adapted from short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *Benito Cereno*, adapted from a novella by Herman Melville. Lowell also emerged as an outspoken critic of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam; he publicly declined an invitation by President Lyndon Johnson to attend the White House Festival of the Arts in 1965 and participated in the historic Pentagon march in 1967. His reaction to social and political upheaval during this time is the subject of *Near the Ocean* (1967) and *Notebook, 1967–68* (1969). Lowell moved to England in 1970 and taught at the

University of Essex and Kent University. After divorcing Hardwick and marrying his third wife, British author Caroline Blackwood, in 1972, Lowell produced three additional volumes of poetry in 1973—*For Lizzie and Harriet*, *History*, and *The Dolphin*, for which Lowell received a second Pulitzer Prize in 1974. His final collection, *Day by Day* (1977), winner of the National Book Critics Award in 1978, was published days before Lowell suffered a fatal heart attack in a New York taxi.

Major Works

Lowell's early poetry is characterized by its Christian motifs and symbolism, historical reference, and intricate formalism, a trait cultivated by Lowell's early masters, the Southern New Critics Tate and Ransom. In *Land of Unlikeness*, introduced by Tate, Lowell responds to the chaos and brutality of the Second World War, his Catholic conversion, and renunciation of his Puritan heritage, often juxtaposing religious beatitude with the turmoil and vapidness of the modern secular world. The title of the collection, suggestive of Lowell's disillusionment, refers to Saint Bernard's idea that the human soul is unlike God and unknown to itself. Lowell incorporated many of these poems in his next volume, *Lord Weary's Castle*. Continuing the theme of rebellion, Lowell expresses his conflicted aversion to war, American imperialism, capitalism, and the legacy of New England Protestantism. In "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," the most famous poem from this volume, Lowell rails against the corruption and lost innocence of America in an elegy for his cousin, Warren Winslow, who drowned while serving in the Navy during the Second World War. His next collection, *The Mills of the Kavanagh*s, marked a spiritual and stylistic crisis for Lowell. Under the influence of Robert Frost and Robert Browning, this volume contains several dramatic monologues and verse translations that, while indicative of Lowell's search for new poetic forms, are weighted with obscure symbolism and affected rhetoric. Lowell's major artist breakthrough came with *Life Studies*, in which he abandoned the rigid formalism of his previous poetry and shifted his focus to personal aspects of his life and family history. The malleable free verse and colloquial tone of this volume reveals the influence of William Carlos Williams. In "Skunk Hour," one of the best known poems from this volume, Lowell discloses his inner turmoil along with descriptions of a coastal Maine town and foraging skunks. The prose memoir "91 Revere Street," which represents the core of *Life Studies*, recounts Lowell's troubled childhood, including unflattering portraits of his parents and home life. The new openness of Lowell's poetry is also reflected in *Imitations*, a collection of loosely translated works by Homer, Sappho, Rainer Maria Rilke, Francois Villon, and Charles-Pierre Baudelaire, among others. Lowell continued in the confessional mode in *For the Union Dead*, whose title poem, originally delivered at the Boston Arts Festival in 1960, is regarded as one of his best. Beginning as a private meditation on his childhood memory of the Boston Aquarium, "For the Union Dead" commemorates the sacrifice of Colonel Robert Shaw, a Union officer killed while leading a regiment of black troops during the Civil War. Shifting between the historic past and present, Lowell laments the erosion of heroic idealism in contemporary America and technological encroachment. In *Near the Ocean*, written at the height of antiwar protest, Lowell returned to the formal metrical patterns of his earlier work. The polemical poetry of this volume, including verse translations of works by Horace, Juvenal, and Dante, derides American militarism and political leadership, as in the popular poem "Waking Early Sunday Morning." *Notebook 1967–68*, which began as diary, is an epic cycle of unrhymed sonnets loosely structured around the four seasons of the year. An amalgam of journal entries, historical observations, correspondence, and private meditations, these poems reflect Lowell's effort to harmonize his personal and public concerns; Lowell significantly revised and rearranged many of these poems in *Notebook* (1970). Lowell continued to work with unrhymed sonnets in his next three volumes—*For Lizzie and Harriet*, *History*, and *The Dolphin*. *For Lizzie and Harriet*, which consists of revised poems from *Notebook*, deals with Lowell's relationship with Elizabeth Hardwick and their daughter. *History*, also containing reworked poems from *Notebook* as well as many new compositions, evokes the broad sweep of Western civilization in fragmentary episodes and verse portraits of diverse historical and literary figures such as Juvenal, Maximilien-François Robespierre, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Berryman. The new poems of *The Dolphin* center upon Lowell's relocation to England, his marriage to Lady Caroline Blackwood, and the birth of their son. In his final volume, *Day by Day*, Lowell abandoned the sonnet

form for free verse and returned to the scrupulous honesty and autobiographic subjects reminiscent of *Life Studies*. The posthumously published *Collected Prose* contains Lowell's essays on various major poets and literary works, unfinished autobiographic sketches, and several interviews.

Critical Reception

Lowell is widely regarded as one of the most important American poets of the postwar era. Though famous for his role in the development of confessional poetry, his early verse in *Lord Weary's Castle* is highly regarded for its command of traditional forms and cerebral aesthetics. Lowell's preoccupation with religious themes in this volume and *Land of Unlikeness* also prompted some reviewers to classify him as a "Catholic poet." His transitional collection, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, is generally considered among his weakest, leading some reviewers to question the limitations of the New Criticism principles which Lowell inherited from his early teachers Tate, Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren. *Life Studies*, hailed as a major turning point in Lowell's career, is also considered a seminal work of contemporary American poetry. Through his example in this work, Lowell initiated the confessional genre and exerted a profound influence on subsequent American poets, including other first generation confessionalists such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Lowell is also praised for his effective blend of autobiography and public history in the acclaimed poems "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and "For the Union Dead." During the late 1960s, Lowell received negative criticism for *Near the Ocean*, dismissed by many reviewers for its overt political rhetoric and what some perceived to be calculated accessibility. His artistic integrity was also called into question with the publication of *The Dolphin*, in which he incorporated verbatim transcripts of private correspondence with Elizabeth Hardwick and others, considered an egregious violation of personal trust by many of Lowell's critics and friends. Despite the wide influence of his poetry, Lowell's inseparable connection to the rise of confessional poetry has also elicited disapproval among critics who dismiss such writing as narrowly self-absorbed. Though critical interest in Lowell's work has diminished somewhat over recent decades, he is still highly regarded as one of the most brilliant and diversely talented American poets of the twentieth century.

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